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SUBJECT: THE EU TRUMPS THE CHURCH: GOC BUCKS CHURCH OPPOSITION AND
PASSES ANTI-DISCRIMINATION LAW

Sensitive But Unclassified. Please Handle Accordingly.

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: The Croatian parliament on July 10 adopted Croatia's first comprehensive anti-discrimination law, despite strong opposition from the Catholic Church and conservative local NGOs. The Law on Suppression of Discrimination is a piece of "umbrella" legislation that prohibits discrimination based on a number of grounds including race, ethnicity, gender, language, political convictions, social standing, property, union membership, education, marital status, disability and gender identity, expression or sexual orientation. The new law is described by the GoC as a requirement for Croatia under the country's Stabilization and Accession Agreement with the EU to adjust domestic legislation to that of the EU. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Prior to passage the proposed law drew heavy criticism from groups affiliated with the Catholic Church, who argued that the law's reference to gender identity or sexual orientation would pave the way for gay marriages or the adoption of children by gay couples. The Croatian Bishops Conference (HBK) made a number of appeals seeking deletion of those references from the law. Representatives of some 120 NGOs close to the Catholic Church protested against the law in front of the Zagreb headquarters of the ruling, center-right HDZ party. The HBK even publicly criticized Deputy PM Jadranka Kosor who led the drafting process, claiming she misrepresented the facts when she said the church generally agreed with the draft law.

¶3. (U) The HDZ rejected the Church's criticism, and argued the law would not lead to gay marriage or adoption. It also insisted that the law was based on EU and Council of Europe recommendations. Several liberal NGOs specifically praised the HDZ and the government for its decisiveness in pushing this legislation through, but Vecernji list, a generally conservative daily, noted that this was the strongest political conflict between the Catholic Church and the HDZ so far. Cardinal Josip Bozanic, in what many saw as a veiled attack on the government, said that the Church, while generally supportive of European integration for Croatia, would also guard against what he called 'a servile mentality' toward the EU, that would simply accept any demand made by Brussels.

¶4. (U) The law, which becomes effective in January 2009, establishes the Ombudsman's office as the central body responsible for the implementation of the law. The current Ombudswoman for Gender Equality, Gordana Lukac Koritnik, told the Embassy that this will significantly expand the workload of the Ombudsman's office. The Ombudsman's office will employ two additional advisors and one expert assistant and will be allocated 1.2 million HRK (263,000 USD) for salaries and new office space and equipment in the first year of the law's implementation.

¶5. (SBU) COMMENT: The debate over this law illustrates the sometimes delicate balance the HDZ faces in managing its relationship with the Catholic Church. The HDZ is generally attentive to the concerns of the church, but as in so many other areas, often finds the demands of EU accession and the broader electorate limiting its room for

maneuver. As local commentators noted, this law represents perhaps the most direct rebuff to the church that the HDZ has ever delivered. In a move meant to mitigate the Church's anger, the government on July 14 also passed legislation that it had promised to both the church and union activists for years, significantly restricting shopping hours on Sundays. END SUMMARY.

BRADTKE